

Section Two: Marginalizing the Dominant

Part One: Reading the Subtext, 1.1 (working title, in progress)

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Short introduction here

This section presents two ways of de-emphasizing the dominant and promoting the oppositional. First is desanctifying the canon by justifying alternative and subtextual readings (reading against the grain) and promoting to theoretical status camp and trash works. Second is producing a basic structural analysis of the phases of oppositionality.

Rehearsal for a Theory of Subtextual Readings

A film is part of the ideological struggles, culture and art of its era. In these respects it is related to numerous aspects of life lying outside the text of the film, thus giving rise to an entire series of meanings which

are often more important to a historian or contemporary than strictly aesthetic problems might be. --Jurij Lotman¹

from Russ.
Formalism -
implicit
meaning

Popular speech in the U.S. today recognizes the concept of films having "subtexts"--meanings which are below the immediate surface, but which are nevertheless present and understood by a smaller or specific group of the entire mass audience. [check RHD] Movie reviewers on tv such as Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert use the term, though not in a systematic way, to signify alternative interpretations. A mail order video catalogue aimed at gay men describes the teen vampire film, **The Lost Boys** (US, 1987, d. Joel Schumacher): "Homoerotic subtexts abound in this breezy, stylishly photographed allegory about drugs, normalcy and peer pressure."² At the same time, the concept of subtextual or oppositional readings of mass culture objects and processes has been developed in recent cultural and media analyses, particularly in controversies around the concept of "reading against the grain." [discussed earlier re audience] Both the popular and the analytic existence of the concept of variant readings recognizes an important phenomenon which challenges some traditional ideas about art, and mass art in particular. Although the term "subtext" is used, it is seldom elaborated, and the the theoretical foundation still needs a synthetic and systematic presentation. My main concern in this chapter is moving toward a definition of subtextual reading which will let me answer the questions, "how does a subtext get there?" and "what can we make of its presence?"

¹Lotman, Jurij. *Semiotics of Cinema* (check)

²Arcade: *The official Magazine of the Insider Video Club*, 24 (July-Aug 1989), 11.

I want to present here a broadly outlined theory of subtextual readings which draws on three broad areas of recent cultural theory. First, it assumes the contemporary semiological understanding that all texts, even the most apparently simple ones, are open to a range of readings, a plurality of meanings, a multiplicity of interpretation. Second, it understands that the act of seeing a film or video is itself a diverse and selective process in which the text's multiplicity is enhanced by a characteristic multiplicity in reception and consumption. Third, subtext theory depends on the understanding that social factors influence reading and that in many cases these factors can be understood in large part, though not fully, in terms of subcultural experience, and that this in turn gives us a way of developing a sociological aesthetics.

From a previously dominant concern with the mass culture text as an art object in itself, a self-contained work studied in terms of form or content or both, critical attention in communications and cultural analysis has shifted to the question of how we read (or understand, interpret, receive) fictional film and tv and other mass culture items. While moving away from the strictly aesthetic, this new critical development avoids the assumptions and methods of traditional communication analysis of effects, uses, and gratifications, or statistical analysis of the audience. If much of this avoidance is due to disciplinary rivalry and suspicion, some of it is also a reaction against the frequently simplistic behaviorism that underpins much communications research and which ignores the processes of fictional, aesthetic, and subjective response to films and tapes. In any case, a full elaboration of the pertinent factors in reading media will

eventually come to terms with sociological and psychological, historical and immediate, empirical and subjective aspects of the phenomenon.

Everyday experience provides a partial understanding of subtextual variation. With cinema this often comes from our experience of observing different understandings of the same film, or parts of a film, by different people. Of course on one level everyone has their own unique experience of a film, and on another level, most of the time films are received within a limited range of meanings. But the fact of difference between readings, usually attributed to variation in taste (which is linked to value), gives us a chance to look at the relation of text and audience in a way which challenges much of the prevailing theoretical orthodoxy.

Against the fundamental formalist position that takes the text in itself as its sole object of study, or which relates the text only to other texts of the same order as in a self-contained internal history of cinema, or the collected work of an artist, or its generic links to other narratives, I am asserting that the text cannot be fully understood without reference to the extra-textual: the "extrinsic" study of texts is not something foreign but integral to understanding the object and process being analyzed. The text is an object of study which exists in rich, diverse, and heterogeneous relations with its culture. "Aesthetic" response must be fundamentally understood as the response of real, complex, contradictory people who are living in history and who are changing continuously in response to changes in their natural and social environments.

I am also asserting that most of the recent formulations of this question by Marxist-influenced film and culture theorists have been inadequate. While it has been generally accepted that there is a fundamental heterogeneity in media texts, and while it asserts that an understanding of the audience or subject-positioning is essential, it tends to posit that subject in a fundamentally idealist and ahistorical way. The subject/audience/receiver is often conceived as an effect of the text. Thus notions circulate such as "the text constructs the subject," which are insightful only when we also understand how the subject constructs the text.³ This reciprocal and dialectical action is an essential starting point for a historical and materialist understanding of the media. Audiences are responding to a complex, plural, heterogeneous text—even when that text appears at first glance to be a simple example of mass culture. People use symbols imaginatively, even those provided by the culture industry.

This rich, dense, text can be studied in itself and in interaction with a heterogeneous audience. Thus the point of analytic work on media is not to find the "correct" interpretation of a specific film or tv program and then argue for it (the dominant strategy of most reviewing and criticism). Nor is it to argue from a pluralist or relativist position that there are

³I have developed these concepts in several earlier articles: "SHAMPOO: Oedipal Symmetries and Heterosexual Knots," *Jump Cut* no. 26 (winter 1981-82), pp. 12-18. "From Tear-jerkers to Thought-provokers: Types of Audience Response," *Jump Cut* no. 4 (Nov.-Dec. 1974), pp. 21-23. "Contemporary Working Class Film Heroes: EVEL KNIEVEL and THE LAST AMERICAN HERO," *Jump Cut* no. 2 (July-Aug. 1974), pp. 11-14.

multiple readings which are finally all the same, so all you can do is declare a reading and follow it. Rather, the task is to find the multiplicity in the text/audience relation, the play of differences in that relation, and to ground that play in the social and cultural situation of a specific audience.

Admittedly this is hard to do. Most of the existing examples of text/audience analysis are totally inadequate to a Marxist project. Empirical research, often tied to the direct needs of capitalism as in tv ratings and cast in the mold of behavioral psychology as in advertising research, conceives of audiences as essentially passive consumers of moving image art, who react to it by purchasing, or if children becoming more violent.⁴ Similarly, studies coming from cultural history, sociology, and mass communication studies often reduce the investigation to a raw content analysis that obliterates the specificity of the medium. A fair number of culturally based investigations coming out of American Studies, Women's Studies, Black Studies, and other interdisciplinary specialities do hardly any better in pursuing thematic, "image of..." and stereotype analysis.

What all these approaches have in common with much semiotic-psychoanalytic film theory is a belief that audiences are fundamentally unitary. The analyses are not aimed at finding contradiction within the audience except as it is a response to ambiguity or irony in the text. In

⁴The overwhelming amount of effects research concerned with representations of violence on U.S. tv and their presumed direct effects on children is an interesting example of research priorities driven by funding, narrow professional self-interest, and ideology reproducing itself. (get stats)

contrast, I am arguing that the audience must be initially understood as loaded with contradiction, active and selective in its responses, both on conscious and unconscious levels. This understanding is fundamentally political. By that I mean that the fullest analysis of audience response (which is for Marxists a special case of the operation of ideology in culture) cannot be constructed only through theoretical speculation but must come out of a close study of specific cases, and that analysis of subcultural use of mass culture products, the differences or aberrations of reading, provides an essential base for further theoretical work on understanding the operation of Ideology in society. I further claim that texts which themselves are especially open to aberrant readings (such as films noirs), provide a particularly pertinent area of study, if it is understood that any conclusions drawn there must be provisional until integrated into an analysis of mainstream texts.

Some of the political implications of developing a theory of subtextual reading are spelled out by Wendy Deutelbaum in a discussion of reader-oriented literary criticism and its relation to feminist literary and political theory.

...The encounter between feminist and reader theory can be a mutually beneficial one. By demanding that literary critics always hold in their gaze both reader and text, reader theory gives women reading the outlines of a theory and a method from which we can legitimately share our perceptions as individuals and as members of groups, from which we can explore our sameness and our differences, from which we can transform ourselves from passive receivers into active producers of

meaning. By demanding that all readers recognize that interpretation is learned, historically determined, and necessarily gender inflected, feminist theory can help the so-far generally male-centered reader theory to acknowledge a body of response quite different from its own and it can help literary theory generally to recognize its patriarchal pretensions to objectivity, universality, and disinterestedness.⁵

I want to provide a suggestive typography of subtextual readings with a set of examples and then return to some important theoretical concerns in discussing subcultures, subtexts, and the nature of the spectator/audience.

I'll start by defining a subtext as a part of a media product which allows for an aberrant reading. By aberrant reading I mean a reading different from the predominant reading, which is usually close to the apparent intended reading of the work's makers.⁶

Umberto Eco discusses this in terms of his concept of ideological overcoding, and points out that any text is understood in part through the reader's ideological subcodes.

This means that not only the outline of textual ideological structures is governed by the ideological bias of the reader but also that a given

⁵Deutelbaum, look up.

⁶add here or elsewhere work/text/product etc discussion

ideological background can help one to discover or to ignore textual ideological structures.⁷

I'll consider fragmentary subtexts and then go on to subtextual readings which can be sustained over a long text. Temporal disjunction is a common source of such readings, as are other types of disjunction such as the intentional or unintentional double entendre. The earnest anti-marijuana film **Reefer Madness** provided an ironic amusement for stoned audiences of the 60s and 70s. In the 80s cable television, such as **Night Flight** (A&E?) often ran such old didactic films as late night weekend material. Documentarists have exploited old films and tv shows for comic and satiric purposes in works such as **Atomic Cafe**, on atomic energy and warfare in the post WW2 era. And experimentalists have used found footage extensively such as Standish Lawder's **Dangling Participle** which mocks teen dating etiquette and sexual behavior instruction. Throughout the 70s and 80s video artists have appropriated from broadcast television in constructing an alternative vision of screen art.

Such disjunction can be brief and passing in reception. For example, in the Douglas Fairbanks film, *The Mark of Zorro*, an intertitle early on in the film identifies the Governor of California as the source of oppression which Zorro combats. The film's internal narration refers to the Spanish colonial governor, but when the film was shown to a campus audience during Ronald Reagan's term as governor of the modern U.S.

⁷eco. theory

state, given his notorious rhetoric against student and antiwar protests, the intertitle provided a hilarious new reading of official villainy. The swashbuckling action invites one to cheer the hero and "hiss the villain," which meshed with a general disposition to detest the conservative politician. [transition]

In a much more serious vein, the performance of certain works, such as the classical **Antigone** or a modern adaptation of the story in a period of political repression can carry a profound immediate meaning for an audience, as it did in occupied France in WW2. [more]

Another source of subtextual readings is the star's biography or entertainment career, which can be reviewed and refracted through historical shifts. During Reagan's second term as President, the films he appeared in were screened on television, creating a new intertextual effect.⁸ Stars who have long careers (and especially when beginning in childhood or adolescence) carry a certain special resonance, especially when their image at different stages may be simultaneously available in

⁸The night before his 1981 inauguration, a Chicago station showed *Bedtime for Bonzo*, in which the actor is paired with a precocious chimp, in what is one of his silliest roles. During Reagan's first term the films were not shown on television, honoring the "fairness doctrine" in broadcasting which would have left stations open to claims from opposition politicians for screen time. Since Reagan could not run for a third term, some of the films were shown during his second term. However, Reagan's most villainous role, in *The Killers* (Seigel, 19--), was not seen [though this might be for distribution reasons; fact check entire para.]

Style space

media circulation. Thus early and later Judy Garland, Elizabeth Taylor, or Mickey Rooney. This can produce a shock of disrecognition, as when we realize that the treacherous Veda in *Mildred Pierce* is the same Ann Blyth who in the late 70s gave her children Hostess Cupcakes, Ding Dongs, Sno-Balls, Twinkies, and Fruit Pies in a tv commerical (a gift resonating with nutritional teachery in some quarters). Or finding Citizen Kane telling us that the wine corporation he was plugging "sells no wine before its time." Or discovering an elderly Young Mr. Lincoln/Tom Joad selling Lifesavers and GAF film. While usually trivial and momentary as a jog of memory, surely it requires an immense effort of the mind to see many of Joan Crawford's mid-career melodramas without coloring that vision with the filter of *Mommie Dearest* (book, motion picture, and phenomenon).

Subtexts can also be the occasion for a more extended analysis as in the Godard-Corin **Letter to Jane** which considers among other things the signification of Jane Fonda's appearance in a news photo from North Vietnam in the context of her father's facial expression in late Depression films.

Corin. We can find this same expression already in the 1940's used by Henry Fonda to portray an exploited worker in the future fascist Steinbeck's **Grapes of Wrath**.

Godard. And even further back in the Actress's paternal history, within the history of cinema, it was still the same expression that Henry Fonda used to cast a profound and tragic look on the black people in **Young**

Mr. Lincoln made by the future honorary Admiral of the Navy, John Ford.⁹

By way of contrast, James Baldwin remembers of the late 30s,

...the only actor of the era with whom I identified was Henry Fonda. I was not alone. A Black friend of mine, after seeing Henry Fonda in **The Grapes of Wrath**, swore that Fonda had colored blood. You could tell, he said, by the way Fonda walked down the road at the end of the film: *white men don't walk like that!* and he imitated Fonda's stubborn, patient, wide-legged hike away from the camera.¹⁰

Subtextual segments may be read as momentarily perceived levels of meaning which are available to a variant reading but which are not sufficient to sustain a major re-reading of a film. For example, aware of Eisenstein's homosexuality, we can read its influence in **Strike** in sequences where the strikers go swimming (lots of handsome beefcake). But the film as a whole does not sustain an extended gay subtext reading. On the other hand, his subsequent work often shows an operatic imagination which can be read from and through a gay sensibility.¹¹

⁹W&F. NB how this outraged auteurist Ford fans...examples Alan Lovell? also how it is totally calculated to do so--typical Godard Gorin play/ploy.

¹⁰Baldwin p. 21

¹¹I am using the common current convention of distinguishing homosexuality as a recurrent activity and fact of life in different cultures throughout history, and gay as a

Another interesting case comes up when a film's narrative combines devices that seem to question, or perhaps offer a confused example of audience identification across/through genders. A good example occurs in **Possessed** when Louise Howell (Joan Crawford) shoots David Sutton (Van Heflin). The scoundrel tries to get off with his typical insincere sweet talk, seen in Louise's subjective point of view. He moves forward, is shot, and clutches his groin which is just below the bottom of the frame.[fig] In the abstract, because of both the progression of the narrative to this point, and the use of a subjective point of view shot, we should all be more or less identifying with the heroine. However, from my own experience of the film and from observing students' facial expression and body language while watching it, as well as from post-viewing discussion, I believe that men and women tend to read this shot differently. The women express enjoyment and pleasure--smiles, positive verbal utterances ("yeah!" "all right!"), openness and movement of arms and legs. The men tend to exhibit anxiety--sometimes grimaces and negative utterances (mild groans), movements of bringing arms and legs together in a protective way. The reason for this difference seems rather obvious: even if, fictionally, the male viewer is identifying with the Crawford figure, the visual depiction of a woman righteously blowing a man away by shooting his sexual organs is simply too threatening for "safe" identification. The men shift major identification to the literally/figuratively castrated one. On the other hand, the women

selfconsciously defined subculture which includes homosexual practices arising historically only in the 19th and 20th centuries. (add Bronski on opera?)

appear to experience delight, even glee, at the exceedingly rare visual depiction of a woman's anger physically targeted on her specific oppressor. For women, justice is served; for men, the punishment is anxiety producing.

[add here? Erens on **The Promise**, various on **I Spit on Your Grave**, from Representations on the female in the slasher film, or develop this later?. here and immediately below, summarize, but develop the argument in the analysis of subj-aud.]

The intention of psychoanalytic semiotics was to examine the text-receiver relation as one of "positioning the spectator as a unified subject." This meshed with the concomitant desire to examine the ideological functioning of media. And it addressed the first thing, or main thing, that a radical investigator needed to specify: that works of many different kinds make one major appeal, have one major effect. [elaborate: We see this addressed in Berger's **Ways of Seeing** in categorical statements which are things that need to be said to clear the air of an idealist position (or a pluralist one or a relativist one): give examples. Mulvey. But it also can be misleading if taken too far. It may be that texts try to position spectators as unified subjects, [elaborate term subject] and certainly some try this more obviously than others (the pledge to the flag, the national anthem, etc.) but the fact remains that actual spectators are historical, gendered, and diverse. In other words, it might be said that the shooting in **Possessed** is an extreme case. Precisely, and it is by examining extreme cases that theory maintains a radical openness.

||porn discussion (move to psych/aud)

Another type of subtextual reading takes place when a good part of a film supports variant reading. Consider **Now, Voyager**. The plot portrays the gradual emergence of a repressed, mousey spinster (Bette Davis) into a sexually active mature woman under the tutelage of a wise older man (Claude Rains). This emergent butterfly metaphor, while certainly being a universally understood pattern within our culture, has a special resonance for many gay men who themselves have experienced or who are experiencing the conditions of discovering and exploring one's sexuality which has been repressed within the family and other institutions. In other words, identification with the character and situation can be very strong.¹² This is visually enhanced because the changes in the Davis character are signalled in changing dress, hair type, and physical bearing--precisely those areas which gay men often first publically present their resistance to dominant heterosexual norms.

Another type of subtextual reading depends on extratextual information for its impetus. For example, several different types of information can suggest a distinct re-reading of **Craig's Wife** (Dorothy Arzner, 1936). In the film (and George Kelly's play on which it is based, and the later remake--**Harriet Craig**, Vincent Sherman, 1950), Harriet Craig, always concerned with the control of her house, is gradually left alone in it as servants, mother-in-law, and husband leave. In the play and the remake, the dominant "moral of the story" interpretation is that Harriet

¹²identification?

drives the others out and the ending shows her trapped in the house, a mausoleum. This presumed ending is reinforced by George Kelly's remark, "Walter Craig was a sweet guy and Mrs. Craig was an SOB."¹³ Or to put it another way, cold and heartless, Harriet gets what she thinks she wants, but we see how hollow that material pursuit is without attention to values of spiritual, emotional, familial, personal concerns. And so Arzner's film seems to many viewers. Yet if we know Arzner's view of the film, we might look at the conclusion differently.

I did try to be as faithful to (Kelly's) play as possible except that I made it from a different point of view. I imagined Mr. Craig was dominated somewhat by his mother and therefore fell in love with a woman stronger than he. I thought Mr. Craig should be down on his knees with gratitude because Mrs. Craig made a man out of him.¹⁴

When we look closely at the conclusion in this light, a new perspective emerges. After everyone leaves, Harriet (Rosalind Russell) is alone in her house when a telegram arrives announcing her sister's death. Tears. The first "soft" emotion, the first trace of her "natural femininity," we see in Harriet is felt for another woman. Then her neighbor, played by Billie Burke (coded as the warm, good woman from her previous movie roles as well as from the film's narrative development), arrives with an armful of flowers, consolation, and the assurance of nurturing support. In the Arzner version Harriet, now more fully and openly emotional, is

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alone in her house, but with another woman's friendship near by.¹⁵ Given this information, the film encourages a certain kind of feminist fantasy closure for the narrative. Freed from the social bonds and roles of the patriarchy, Harriet can finally blossom emotionally. She has moved from upper middle class, heterosexual, supervised by a woman (the mother-in-law, who with a nice spirited old-fashioned manner doesn't fall into the mean mother-in-law type) and in turn supervisor of them (the servants), to not having to maintain class relations. She can now form a friendship with a lower middle class widow raising a child, does not have to maintain a heterosexual lifestyle, and has a relation of friend and neighbor with this figuratively "new sister" figure. In this subtext, the film seems to say that women are better off leaving the patriarchy than staying in it.

There is additional extratextual information about Arzner which could encourage such a reading. First, if we know other Arzner films, we might be encouraged to look for a feminist subtext since they offer what many take as feminist readings, or more accurately, they offer the possibility of such a reading, and when shown in the context of a feminist film course, a women's film or arts festival, or other situation encouraging a reading which is similar to a specifically feminist one. Second, if we know the criticism on Arzner which has been a fundamental concern of recent feminist film analysis, we would be encouraged to look for a feminist reading.¹⁶ (check Mayne) Similarly, if we accepted

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domestic melodrama as having a profound political and cultural relation to women's lives under capitalist patriarchy, we would be more likely to pick up on Arzner's "different point of view," as she put it.¹⁷ Playwriter Kelly doubtless meant the neighbor's arrival after Harriet is shaken by the telegram's death announcement as a trope of contrast--warm vs. cold--reemphasizing that Harriet is frigid in body and heart. Arzner transforms it from a mechanical contrast to a narrative development. Third, if we knew that Arzner was not openly heterosexual and that all her studio photographs show her in masculine dress and hairstyle (in that period coding her as a butch lesbian), we might also be more likely to read the feminist subtext. In a similar vein, one can read the all women groups of Arzner's **Working Girls** and **Dance, Girl, Dance**, as women's enclaves which support close friendships. And, if one likes the fantasy, it's easy to see them as lesbian groups. Indeed, today, with changing manners and awareness of homosexuality, it is hard not to interpret women dancing a foxtrot together in the **Working Girls** boardinghouse as implying sexual affection, though it remains largely coded within "innocence."

In the same vein, viewing **Dance Girl Dance** with an eye to possible gay relationships, it's hard to miss the dance producer (Ralph Bellemy) walking in a close arm-in-arm with his male choreographer at a key moment when we first see him. Their body language speaks physical and emotional intimacy. [fig] With the subtextual understanding that he is gay, we must read his later intervention in the plot in favor of Judy

(Margaret O'Brien) as one of friendship and professional support rather than sexual linkage, although the latter has been the preferred reading of several feminist critics who fault the ending for recouperation into patriarchy.¹⁸

[add further discussion here from Parker Tyler, Screening the Sexes]
short discussion of intertextuality

*This whole section on
subjects seems theoretically
very powerful.*